

All for one! One for all!

To help provide professional, first-hand advice for independent retailers, Harpers has extended its Top Merchants programme to bring leading, award-winning multi-site operators together. Here's how its new initiative, the Independent Wine Crew, hopes to help the independent trade as a whole



Matt Hennings, Hennings Wine Merchants: Clear benefits in joining the group include sharing experiences and learning how best to handle and minimise business costs.

They say there is strength in numbers which is why this week Harpers introduces an extension to its Top Merchants programme that invites award-winning multi-site independent wine retailers to come together to share experiences not only with themselves, but with the rest of the wine trade and independent sector in particular. Yes, The Independent Wine Crew has been born.

While independent retailers have never enjoyed such a high profile in the trade, with seemingly every leading distributor, supplier and wine agent desperate to get the leading players on their books, it does not make operating in such a fiercely competitive arena as the UK high street any easier.

The supermarkets and multiple specialists continue to carve out more, not less, of the wine market year after year, and for all the plaudits, awards and praise, independents are having to fight over increasingly smaller slices of the overall wine retail sector.

By their very nature, independent retailers, operate almost exclusively on their own. Yes, some may have formed ties with others and joined independent buying groups to pool resources to buy certain wines, but for the large part of

what they do, independents are very much on their own.

There are no buying groups, for example, to help you when no staff turn up on a Saturday night, or the tills don't work, or it comes to understanding your latest tax bill.

Over the past few years Harpers has looked to play its part in bringing the independent retail sector together with our Top Merchants programme.

We have tried through a series of conferences, round tables, seminars, wine promotions, buying trips and a lot more besides to provide merchants with the platform to come together, share experiences, network and hopefully the opportunity to go back to their businesses with a few more ideas on how to run their own stores.



"We are all struggling to come up with the answers so let's learn from other people's experiences"

Jamie Hutchinson

HELP FOR ALL

The Independent Wine Crew hopes to not only offer a platform for retailers that are growing at a similar pace and facing the same challenges that come with opening more than one store, but also provide a steering group for all independents. An advisory board, if you like, that can hopefully allow all independents to learn from their experiences, their successes and even their mistakes.

Members of the Independent Wine Crew might also be able to offer a united voice when representing the independent sector, initially to the trade as a whole, but also to the public, through consumer and national press. Speaking out on issues that are important to all independent retailers.

WHO CAN GET INVOLVED?

The Independent Wine Crew is potentially open to all leading, award-winning multi-site wine merchants that are willing to give up their time to be actively involved in the programme, but is being initially set up by Harpers on an invitation-only basis. We are looking for those operators that are willing to give up their time to attend meetings all around the

country, take part in debates, be available for media interviews and also be willing to share their experiences not only with fellow Crew members but, through Harpers, the trade as a whole.

THE STORY SO FAR

Harpers held the first Independent Wine Crew meeting at founder member the Oxford Wine Company's new café in Oxford last month with the initial group of invited merchants. This was to discuss how they would like to see the programme organised and what benefits and overall use they felt the new group could have, not just for the members but for the independent trade as a whole. These included The Oxford Wine Company, Cambridge Wine Merchants, Hennings Wine Merchants, Corks Out and the Sampler. Invited merchants that could not attend include Jeroboams, WoodWinters and Red & White.

It was clear from this initial meeting that the members wanted the group to be able to speak out for independents, not just to the trade but to the national and consumer press, and were particularly keen to find more ways in which wines in independent stores can be